

Facts & Information

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Public Pay Phones

Smart Consumer Tips

Using a public pay phone is not as easy as it used to be. Federal deregulation of pay phones has resulted in pay phones charging varying rates for local and long-distance calls. When using a pay phone, it pays to keep a few tips in mind.

Check the local coin rate posted on the phone

Rates may vary from one phone to another and call length may be limited as well. Before making a local call, look closely at the information about local calls posted on or near the pay phone.

Verify the rates of other services if you are charging the call

When using coins, you will know how much you are paying when you are asked to put the amount into the machine. But if you are using a calling card or credit card or a collect call, do not wait until you get the bill to learn how much you will be paying. Ask for rate information before you make the call. You should even check the rate for directory assistance before using that service since charges can vary widely.

Toll-free numbers are not free for everyone

While you can still make a toll-free call from a pay phone, federal rules require the owner of the toll-free number to compensate the pay phone operator for the call. Some calling card companies pass that cost on in the form of a surcharge to their customers when they use their calling card from a pay phone. Generally, this surcharge is no more than 35 cents per call.

Prepare in advance for situations when you might use a pay phone

Trying to make local and long-distance calls from a public pay phone can be confusing and occasionally expensive. Like home and business telephones, a public pay phone is preset to one or more companies providing local, long-distance and operator services. However, you can route your call to your desired carrier.

Determine in advance how to contact your preferred long-distance company from a pay phone and keep those instructions handy for emergencies. Often this means either dialing a toll-free number or a seven-digit access code.

After dialing an access code, you will hear a menu of choices. You may then complete your call by entering the phone number, your calling card number and personal identification code; or it prompts you to dial zero for an operator. Automated features will be much less expensive than using a live operator.



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All UTC publications are
available in alternate formats.
Call (360)664-1133.

A calling card does not guarantee you will be using that service

Pay phones will often accept other calling cards as a form of payment, particularly calling cards from local telephone companies. Do not assume by using such a card that you will receive the card's advertised services. If you simply dial zero, instead of your preferred carrier's access number, the call will be handled by the carrier preset on that particular phone. Your calling card will bill you but the rates will be those of the pay phone's preset long-distance carrier.

How to accept collect calls without getting soaked

When you accept a collect call, you are accepting responsibility for the charges. You have the right to ask for the rate of the call before accepting the call. If it is an automated operator, hold on until the live operator answers to ask for the rates. Collect calls are usually more expensive than a direct-dialed pay phone call but some collect calls can be quite a bit more expensive than competitively-priced collect calls

Making calls from a hotel, motel, or hospital room

You may have some difficulty reaching your preferred carrier from some locations, such as hotel/motel or hospital rooms. If this is the case, contact the manager and ask how to make this type of call from your room so that you can access your preferred long-distance company. Note that many hotel/motels add to your hotel bill a surcharge for each call made from your room.

Stop, Look and Listen

Be cautious when using pay phones. Check the details before you call. Look at the posted information on the pay phone. Read the fine print. Listen to the operator's message (live or automated) when making a calling card or any other type of operator assisted call. If you are unfamiliar with the company, call the operator and ask for rates before placing the call.

Federal and state rules require that pay phones provide access to all available carriers. If your preferred carrier's access code is not working, the pay phone may be in violation of UTC and federal rules. If so, call the repair/refund number posted on the phone and report the problem. Ask the operator to transfer you to your preferred carrier, or to provide a workable access number to the carrier.

How to register a complaint

Posted on each pay phone is a repair/refund number, as well as phone numbers of the pay phone owner and the operator service provider(s). If you have a problem with the pay phone (i.e., coins not returned, access to preferred carrier blocked, no phone book), call the repair/refund number from that phone and report the problem. The pay phone owner should offer to repair the problem quickly.

If the problem is on your bill, call the company's toll-free number listed on the bill and discuss your concerns. If necessary, ask for a supervisor or manager. You may also contact our Consumer Affairs office at 1-800-562-6150 for further assistance.